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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR STAFFDEL MIXTER

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Embassy warmly welcomes members of Staffdel Mixer to the Philippines! We have a packed schedule for you that includes meetings on counterterrorism, U.S.-Philippine military cooperation, unlawful killings, and Peace Corps issues. You are coming to the Philippines at an important time. The Armed Forces of the Philippines is demonstrating impressive combat prowess in ongoing operations against Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists on the island of Jolo. Under the leadership of Chief of Staff General Esperon, the Armed Forces of the Philippines is fully committed to the Defense Reform and Battalion Retraining Programs. Following advice from the Melo Commission on unlawful killings, the Philippine government has undertaken additional actions to address the issue. You will be meeting with several key military and civilian government officials who will be able to provide you first-hand insights into these issues. We have also planned Saturday site visits to observe the work of two committed Peace Corps volunteers in the Subic Bay area. End Summary.

INCREASED COMBAT PROWESS

¶2. (SBU) With U.S. support, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is demonstrating impressive combat prowess in its ongoing counterterrorism operations on the southern island of Jolo. AFP troops -- including soldiers, Marines, airmen, and sailors -- have remained engaged in sustained action against Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists since August 1, 2006. Improved operational readiness rates for aircraft and vessels, casualty treatment, night helicopter medical evacuations, and tactical field skills are directly attributable to U.S. training, advice, and assistance. Successful operations have led to the deaths in military operations of Khadaffy Janjalani and Abu Solaiman, the top two leaders of the Abu Sayyaf Group, and kept Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists on the run.

COMMITMENT TO DEFENSE REFORM

¶3. (SBU) Philippine Defense Reform Program is transforming the Philippine military into a more transparent, accountable, and effective institution. This U.S.-supported effort aims at a complete restructuring of the military establishment ranging from personnel management and logistics to acquisition and training. With the advice of the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group and a 13-member team of U.S. experts, the AFP and Department of National Defense have

already registered significant gains. U.S. Special Force troops are helping jump-start the newly begun Battalion Retraining Program, which will retrain all 72 Army and 12 Marine battalions.

URGING ACTION AGAINST UNLAWFUL KILLINGS

¶4. (SBU) A serious negative factor in this otherwise positive picture is the increase in reports of unlawful killings. Such killings, committed by security forces, the Communist New People's Army, and local criminals, were common during the Marcos dictatorship, and have continued, albeit with less frequency, since that time. Over the past one to two years, however, there has been a troubling increase in reports of unlawful killings. As friends and allies, we are concerned about such killings, whoever is responsible, but particularly about allegations that members of the security forces have been involved. Addressing unlawful killings in a serious, effective way and ensuring that Philippine authorities bring those responsible to justice is important to the U.S.-Philippine relationship and, of course, to the Philippines' own democratic development.

¶5. (U) We are encouraged that President Arroyo has taken several steps to address this problem, including establishing a police task force, called Task Force Usig ("to prosecute"), to investigate the killings and to file charges against the murderers, as well as a commission under the leadership of former Philippine Supreme Court Justice Melo. The Melo Commission has examined this problem and made policy recommendations, on which the Government has promptly acted. The Philippine Government also invited a UN Special Rapporteur, Philip Alston, to inquire into the issue. In his report, Alston cites the Philippine Government's recognition

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of the gravity of the problem, expresses concern about the views of the armed forces, and states that the various measures ordered by President Arroyo in response to the Melo Commission report constitute important first steps, but much remains to be done.

¶6. (U) The Melo Commission report concluded that: circumstantial evidence linked "some elements" of the military to the killings, but given the lack of witnesses there is insufficient evidence to support successful prosecutions or convictions; there is no official or sanctioned policy by the military or its civilian superiors to resort to illegal liquidations; there is no definitive accounting of the actual number of killings, but "even one is too many"; the killing of journalists is mostly attributable to reprisals from politicians, warlords, or business interests, rather than agents of the government; and, prosecutions have been more successful when there is a greater willingness of witnesses to testify. The report also stated that President Arroyo's resolve to stop these killings has been made clear, both in public statements and through actions such as the creation of Task Force Usig and the Melo Commission itself.

¶7. (U) Six soldiers have been identified with involvement in the killing of local leftists, journalists, and others thus far. Four have been charged and two are already under arrest. Opposition groups claim even more military involvement. The killing of civilians by security forces without corresponding prosecution greatly undermines the rule of law, creating a culture of impunity that itself undermines democracy. We have consistently urged our Filipino counterparts to address the problem squarely, investigate the allegations of Philippine military or police involvement, and hold any perpetrators accountable. Your trip is an opportunity to reiterate to senior military, police, and civilian leaders the need to take decisive action to resolve the issue of unlawful killings, which threatens to tarnish

the impressive victories the armed forces is winning in the field.

LONG LEGACY OF PEACE CORPS SERVICE

18. (U) The Peace Corps Program in the Philippines dates back to 1961, when 130 volunteers arrived for classroom assignments in language, math, and science. The program remained primarily focused on classroom instruction until the 1970s, when it shifted to social and economic development in the rural areas. In the 1980's, the Philippine Departments of Education, Environment, and Agriculture provided a framework for programs in their respective areas of responsibility; the Peace Corps supplied volunteers accordingly. The program was suspended in 1990 due to security concerns, but resumed two years later to launch small island development efforts in the provinces of Catanduanes, Romblon, and Batanes in Luzon. At present, there are more than 100 volunteers spread throughout the country serving in teacher training programs, coastal resources management, water sanitation, and park and protected area community development. To date, more than 8,500 volunteers have served in the Philippines since 1961. You will be visiting two such volunteers in the Subic Bay area, two hours north of Manila, both of whom work with organizations that provide services to orphans, foster children, and children with special needs.

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